

‘Healthy through habit: Interventions for initiating & maintaining health behavior change’

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[...]

Research has shown that people habitually consume food that they neither want nor even like. For example, movie theater patrons with strong popcorn-eating habits consumed just as much stale, week-old popcorn as they did fresh popcorn, despite reporting that they hated the stale food.

[...]

Changing unhealthy habits, much like forming healthy ones, requires an understanding of the psychology behind habits. Specifically, ridding oneself of unhealthy habits requires neutralizing the **context cues** that automatically trigger **habit performance**.

[...]

Cue Disruption

Interventions can take advantage of naturally occurring life events—such as moving to a new house, beginning a new job, or having a child—that reduce or eliminate exposure to the familiar cues that automatically trigger **habit performance**

[...]

Habit discontinuity interventions capitalize on this window of opportunity in which people are no longer exposed to cues that trigger old habits. For example, [a] study showed that students’ TV-watching habits were disrupted when they transferred to a new university, but only if cues specific to this behavior changed, such as their new residence no longer having a screen in the living room. Without the old cue to trigger their TV habits, students only watched TV at the new university if they intended to.

[...]

Environmental Reengineering

The impact of unhealthy **habit cues** also can be reduced by altering **performance environments**, or the place where the unhealthy habit regularly occurs

[...]

Although **environmental reengineering** often involves **cue disruption** (as described above), it additionally introduces new or altered environmental features to support the healthy behavior. The basic psychological process involves adding **behavioral friction** to unhealthy options and reducing behavioral friction for healthy ones to lubricate their adoption.

Adding friction

Large-scale social policies can introduce friction into an environment, making it harder for people to perform unhealthy habits. Smoking bans in English pubs, for instance, made it more difficult for people with strong smoking habits to light up while drinking. Having to leave the pub to smoke creates friction, so smoking bans have generally increased quit rates. Bans on visible retail displays of cigarettes also add friction by forcing potential purchasers to remember to request cigarettes. Such bans are especially likely to reduce impulsive tobacco purchases by removing environmental smoking cues

[...]

Reducing friction

A variety of existing policies successfully alter physical environments to promote frictionless accessibility to healthy behaviors over unhealthy ones. These include the availability of recreational facilities, opportunities to walk and cycle, and accessibility of stores selling fresh foods. The effectiveness of such friction-easing interventions is clear: U.S. residents with access to parks closer to home engage in more leisure-time physical activity and have lower rates of obesity. Also, a bike-share program instituted in London increased exercise rates. Furthermore, in U.S. metropolitan areas, fruit and vegetable consumption was greater and obesity rates were lower among people living closer to a supermarket with fresh foods.

[...]

[large-scale] **behavior change interventions** can provide individuals with the knowledge and ability to reengineer their own personal environments.